

3rd Act magazine

AGING WITH CONFIDENCE

From Communes to Cohousing

By Richard Seven - Spring, 2017



Somewhere along the line, it seems front porches gave way to back decks. Neighborhoods began to feel more like a collection of random people living next door to one another than a community where shared interests were often debated but always celebrated. Privacy trumped belonging.

But as you age, and as your kids and friends begin to scatter, chores get harder, and your social calendar grows sparse, you wonder: Now what?

The cohousing movement offers a possible answer by building on the bedrock notion of *community*. Cohousing developments, usually multigenerational, are called “intentional communities” for a reason. Individual dwellings surround common open space to nudge conversation. Residents gather in a shared building—the heartbeat driving the goal—to dine together, do laundry, perhaps exercise, and socialize.

Cohousing supporters say the model offers the best of both worlds: private dwellings (with kitchens included) amid a tight-knit neighborhood. The homes are typically smaller than those in a single-family neighborhood and are bunched closer together so common space can be enhanced and the development’s footprint can be maximized.

The movement is still relatively small. There are about 163 cohousing communities in various stages in the U.S. (with more than 20 in Washington State) and another 134 are forming. The Cohousing Association of the United States says that since the communities are part of the new sharing economy, they’ll likely expand in the next few decades as people seek sustainability and as changing demographics force innovation.

“Interest in cohousing has surged in recent years, a trend driven by baby boomers seeking a downsized, community-oriented and environmentally-friendly lifestyle,” says Alice Alexander, executive director of the association. “This group, who began turning 60 in 2006, does not want to retire or grow older in the same kind of aging institutions in which they placed their own parents.”

Shelly Parks of Seattle has spent much her career in the senior housing arena. She is an ardent backer and student of the cohousing concept and believes it represents boomers’ perpetual quest for doing things better. She is convinced the lifestyle will take off when people learn what cohousing is and is not.

“A commune-type setting often comes to mind and people then quickly reject the notion because they think they will be giving away all privacy,” she says. “But privacy is an important part of cohousing.”

Cohousing made sense to Pat Hundhausen and her husband, David. They are founding members of Quimper Village, a 28-home cohousing community for people 55 and older scheduled to open in the Olympic Peninsula town of Port Townsend this fall. She believes it will be the first senior cohousing development in the state.

“Working on building Quimper Village has been life-changing for many of its members including myself,” Hundhausen says. “I knew nothing of cohousing, but I knew I wanted to live in a close and caring community as I aged. I think I will have more fun and live longer and healthier.”

The core group involved in Quimper found the location and hired experienced cohousing architects Kathryn McCamant and her husband, Charles Durrett, to lead the group in planning the community. The pair coined the term “cohousing” in 1988 after they studied the concept in Denmark. McCamant, now president of CoHousing Solutions, and Durrett have worked with groups across the U.S. and Canada. Durrett also wrote *The Senior Cohousing Handbook: A Community Approach to Independent Living*.

McCamant says the “common house” is a critical component for any cohousing development because it is a sharing place. “I don’t have to clean up my house for you, and we can come and go as we please,” adds McCamant, who lives in a cohousing development in Nevada City, CA. “I feel like my common house is an extension of my living room that I share with neighbors. We use it all times of day and night for a wide variety of uses including community dinners, meetings, parties, smaller gatherings, and guest rooms.”

While upfront costs, planning meetings, years of development, and perhaps a few squabbles can make cohousing seem daunting, proponents say it is a more cost-effective and sustainable way to live. The little perks, like having a nearby carpool partner or neighbors who will keep an eye on your home when you’re gone, add up to something greater. Instead of 32 sets of tools for 32 houses, everyone can use the community workshop.

Gretchen Krampf of Orcas Island is looking to create a cohousing “hybrid” of residential units and a learning institute that could also attract arts and cultural events. She sees cohousing as a youthful way to age.

“There is a mindful ease in creating spaces to age gracefully and share resources,” she says. “Sharing common areas and building a resilient community where my husband and I can have our own space, and shared, common spaces for social interaction and ease-of-living opens up lots of time, energy, and money.”

Parks, the Seattle cohousing advocate, acknowledges cohousing takes collaboration and give-and-take. But she says it also spurs intellectual growth, staves off loneliness, and expands opportunities.

“My husband tends to be an introvert and when I first began exploring cohousing, I thought he would not be supportive,” she says. “To my surprise, he quickly embraced it and very much wants to be in a community. I think cohousing is great for introverts. It builds in an easy way to not become self-isolating.”

Richard Seven has lived and worked as a journalist in Seattle for more than three decades. He spent most of that time as a feature writer and editor for The Seattle Times.